



Character IS ACTION

*The first of three articles on
how to use the tools of acting*

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WHEN I BEGAN TEACHING acting twenty years ago, I was determined to make the work as tangible as possible for students. That had not been my experience as a student of acting. After three years in graduate school I could throw around a bunch of acting terms, but I wasn't really able to use my so-called technique effectively. Back in those days, my actor friends and I spent a lot of time talking about technique, or craft, but few of us could use it in a deliberate and ordered way. For most of us, despite our training and our degrees, a systematic approach to acting broke down when we really needed to use it.

So what exactly is this craft stuff and when exactly do we need it? Here's an answer. Craft, when we really have it at our fingertips, is a set of tools that gives us a step-by-step process that can be used to make our acting work effective. This is the first article of a three-part series that will explore that process.

To begin with, every actor's toolkit should include three fundamental activities conducted in the following order. The first is script analysis of the

entire play before rehearsals begin. The second is a synthesis of the actor's homework and rehearsal discoveries. The third is the listening and reacting that takes place in rehearsal.

Script analysis includes discovering:

- The overall story of the play.
- The central conflict and all other conflicts found in the play.
- The cause-and-event sequence of the story overall and scene by scene.
- What the story is trying to tell us—its thematic elements.
- How your character relates to the overall story and central conflict of the play; your character's specific conflicts.
- Your character's purpose in the story.
- Your character's objectives overall and scene-by-scene related to the characters sharing the stage with your character.
- The risks, stakes, and obstacles that your character faces.
- Your character's arc (his journey of change through the play).

- Your character's big moments.

Synthesis focuses on finding and executing a body of actions—physical and psychological—for each moment of the play that lead you to what you need as a character while serving the story.

Listening and reacting involves getting all of the above-mentioned work into your body so that you are free to listen and react to the moments spontaneously yet purposefully as they unfold on stage.

Most of us need craft or technique to guide us through the homework and rehearsal process of acting as we build toward opening night or the moment when the cameras begin to roll. The craft that each actor develops through training and experience is individual and might not look like what I've described above, but most successful actors have one. This may not be what some of you think. Often we see and hear famous actors talking about their instincts and their spontaneity, and yes, these things do play an important part in making the work of the best actors exciting and believable. But many of these actors

already have basic craft so ingrained within their persona that they don't even realize they have gone through a process that allows them to be spontaneous. Others may indeed be geniuses whose instincts are so reliable that they can skip several steps. But these actors are rare.

If you're already an actor who does everything related to acting brilliantly, then put down this article and go read a good play or something else that will broaden your theatre knowledge. But if you're still reading this, here's a news flash—thinking that you can let your instincts lead you to a great performance is a lot like Magellan saying he's going to circumnavigate the globe without a compass. The fact is, it's hard enough to circle the globe—or act well—even when you're using everything that's available to you.

Let me put it another way. Let's imagine for a moment that the part you are auditioning for or the role you are rehearsing is a huge unsculpted block of marble. The material is smooth and alluring, and you can imagine its potential as a thing of beauty. But in its raw state, it is cold and lifeless. I tell you that you have three weeks to turn that big block of marble into your performance. What do you do? If I give you a hammer and chisel, that might help—if you're skilled in their use. Suppose I give you a picture of what the block of stone should look like in three weeks? That would help as well, but it's still a long way from getting you to use your tools effectively to make that chunk of marble look like what it's supposed to.

That's sort of what acting without craft is like. Most of the time when we are called upon to act, we are given a set of directions called the script. The script tells us what the block of marble—our character—should look like, but only if we know how to read it. We need craft to do our work effectively and efficiently. We need it when we audition for a role, and we need it when we are sculpting our performance during the

rehearsal process. In a moment, I'm going to explain the approach I think an actor should use to learn the craft of acting. First, though, we're going to review how modern acting techniques evolved.

Feeling versus doing

Konstantin Stanislavki, the great Russian acting teacher and theorist, realized the need for actors to have a set of tools, and spent his professional life searching for just such a tangible process. His work began with a study of emotion-based acting, and evolved into a system that depended far more heavily on actions. He became convinced that action-based acting was

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far more reliable than emotion-based acting. But today his work can seem contradictory and confusing. And what he was saying at the end of his career was far different than what he was saying at the beginning. Nevertheless, all acting systems or techniques developed since Stanislavski's time rely on his work, if not as the centerpiece, then certainly as a starting point. The differences in approaches to acting taught today are mostly about vocabulary and the teacher's primary focus of attention.

If you want a broader introduction to the Stanislavski's approach to acting try the following books: *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*, by Melissa Bruder, *Let the Part Play You*, by Anita Jesse, *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, by Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell, and *Training the Actor*, by Sonia Moore.

Some contemporary acting techniques do focus on emotion. Lee Strasberg's Method is such a technique. Certainly, the use of emotion can be a powerful tool for an actor. It can help make our responses deeper, truer, and distinctively individual. Strasberg was one of several prominent acting teachers working in the latter half of the twentieth century, including Sanford Meisner and Stella Adler, who developed their own acting theories based on the work of Stanislavski.

Meisner chose to emphasize listening, reacting, and being in the moment—an essential part of the process as well. It helps an actor be spontaneous and honest on stage.

Adler focused on action and the use of imagination while another teacher (and renowned actor), Uta Hagen, concentrated on action and the use of self. Both Adler's and Hagen's teachings have guided actors toward natural choices and moments. One way or another, each of these techniques shares many of the basic premises that Stanislavski discovered and explored.

My own teaching strategy, substantially different from when I wrote my first article for this magazine in 1994, is also rooted in Stanislavski, but not emotion-based acting. I teach beginning actors about doing rather than feeling. That means acting that starts with finding a good strong action to play and then playing it for all it's worth. Actions come in two varieties—the things we do physically and the things we do psychologically. On stage we are doing all the time; we are always playing an action. Our actions are determined by our character's needs. As actors playing those characters, we pursue those

needs at all times even when our characters are unaware of it.

My guess is that most of you think of acting as internal or emotion-based—that is, in terms of feeling rather than doing. Either approach is good if it gets you where you want to go: a performance that is clear, exciting to watch, and tells the story that the playwright and your director intended. This, of course, should be your ultimate goal. My own long-held belief is that, while emotion-based acting can certainly aid an actor in performance, action-based acting is more easily taught and mastered by a greater percentage of students. Anyone can find and execute a physical action. Not everyone can feel sad or happy or jealous on cue. I choose to teach things that will work and that, with practice, almost everyone will be able to do. I'm not suggesting that emotion isn't important, just that it may not be the best choice for your primary tool.

Here's what I mean. Take the emotion *anger*, for instance. Suppose I say to you "be angry." Or suppose I command you to "get angry!" Can you conjure the feeling? Some of you might be able to, but even if you can, I suspect it will be a generalized form of anger, vague and unformed. And what do you do with that feeling once you can conjure it up? In life, when we get angry, I mean really angry, we usually *do* something with it. Anger that big usually provokes an action. The command for anger could leave you feeling a bit awkward. If you studied for several years with a teacher like Lee Strasberg, you might learn to tap in to your own emotions and learn how to bring them into the scene you are doing with great effectiveness, or you might not. Some actors are simply better suited to this approach than others.

Before we move on to a more detailed discussion of action-based acting, I want to point out a few more things about emotion-based work. There are other problems you will face if you think of acting only in

terms of conjuring emotions. For instance—even if you are totally emotionally available (and few of us are)—you'll need to think about reliability and consistency. If you can cry today, does that mean you can cry on cue tomorrow? Crying may not come as easy after you win the million-dollar lottery and your boyfriend has finally told you he loves you. Some of you might be able to, but I suspect a lot of you won't. And happiness might be equally hard to play if you just got word that Harvard rejected you or your mother says no to the party this weekend.

I remember acting classes in which my teacher tried to get an actor more emotionally involved in what he was doing. If anger was involved, for instance, he might have asked personal questions or provoked the actor in some way, and when he got the actor appropriately hopped up, told the actor to go back into the scene. Often the work was fuller and more exciting and far more spontaneous than it had been before; and when the actor sat down after the scene, he felt triumphant. I have been made to feel that way myself. But would the actor be able to bring that same true emotion to the stage when he put up the scene the following week? Stanislavski noted, as countless actors have discovered, that what they did emotionally once is not always repeatable. Worse, actors often find themselves trying to recreate the emotion once felt honestly and spontaneously in a way that ends up being not only false, but worse, takes them out of the moment.

Telling the story by doing

Now, let's get back to our angry exercise: suppose I tell you to bang your fist into a pillow or cushion as if you were angry. Do it with abandon. Try to destroy the pillow with your fist. I bet you can do it. I bet you are able not only perform an interesting and believable action, but I also bet you'll feel something like anger, if not the real thing—if you really are committed to the action. That's why

Stanislavski grew to like actions more than emotions for building craft. They are reliable and they conjure up emotions when you choose the right physical action. You can try this out for yourself—select your emotions to conjure (happiness, sadness, worry, etc.)—and then find some actions that you would do if you were having those feelings.

Of course, actors seldom have occasion to act an emotion in a vacuum. When you're working through a script, there is always a context for the emotion. In other words, there is a reason provided by the script that tells us why we are feeling angry or sad, or jealous or unloved. So if we look, that emotion will always be coming out of the situation or the story. If we play an action that is appropriate to the story, we will also discover that that it can be played with an emotional context. The doing not only helps demonstrate the feeling, but more importantly, it helps tell the story as well. More to the point, will the opposite also be true? If we play a feeling, fully and honestly, will the story necessarily be communicated to an audience?

Audiences know what we're thinking and feeling primarily through what we say and do, not through telepathy. So feeling a truthful feeling does not necessarily communicate on its own to the audience no matter how real it seems to the actor. Ultimately, we act for the audience, not ourselves—some of my students think this is a crazy idea, but I'll take it even a step further. It ultimately doesn't matter if you feel it as long as the audience believes you do.

Here's an example of what I mean. Suppose I asked you to improvise a scene in which the given circumstances (the who, the what, the when, and the where of the situation) are as follows: You are a college student talking to your sister about your father who has died suddenly of a heart attack. Your father and you argued recently, and at the time of his death, you had not made

up with each other. Your sister, to your knowledge, had no such problems with your dad. You and your sister are at your home drinking tea following the funeral. What do you do?

If your answer is something like, “I will be very sad,” that may be problematic. How will you show me that? If you say you will cry and you can do it believably, that will tell me you are sad and may be impressive as well, at least for a moment or two. But then what? Once the audience has seen you crying, they are ready to move on—ready to see and hear the next part of the story and watch it unfold. In the improv, you can’t just sit there and cry forever. You’ll have to *do* something. Maybe, since your sister is there with you, you will talk to her about your dad, but there will need to be a *reason* for what you say to her, and your sister will need to have a *reason* to say the things she says to you. Perhaps you, as the brother, want your sister to know that you loved your father, despite your differences with him. And maybe the actor playing your sister wants your character to know that she did not always see eye-to-eye with your father, either. One way or another, hopefully what you have to say to each other will be interesting and important enough to resonate with the audience. If your improv ends up sounding random and doesn’t go anywhere, the scene will be boring despite the fact that you cried believably.

Playing an action

In the brief scenario we just discussed, I planted some seeds for telling a good story, even in an improv. Did you find those seeds? Would you have been able to use them? The skilled actor reads a script looking for such pieces of information, and then uses them as effectively as possible to make a good story.

To give you a better grasp of how to play an action, I’m going to suggest two more short scenarios. Here are two questions you should be

thinking about as you work in these scenes:

- What in these scenarios can you use to build an effective story and therefore an effective scene?
- Are these stories believable, compelling, and consistent with scenarios provided?

Here’s the first scene:

You and a friend have found a bag of one hundred dollar bills in a parking lot. Your friend is a rich kid. You are not. In fact, your mother is home sick right now, perhaps seriously ill, but since she has no health insurance, she has avoided going to the doctor. Your friend’s father is a politician currently running for reelection.

The second scene:

You have your father’s car for the evening. It is your first time out at night since you got your license. You have just pulled out of a parking space in the mall and have swiped another car. Your car is undamaged, but there’s an ugly crease in the other guy’s fender. No one has seen you do this. Your friend, president of the student council, says you have to leave a note. Your dad has a terrible temper and beats you when he’s had a few drinks. It’s Friday night.

In both of the above scenarios there are obvious and less obvious details that will provide you with the potential to create an actionable and therefore interesting story. It is your job to know what that story is potentially, and turn it into something interesting. Playwrights begin this process. It is the actor’s job to fulfill it with physical and psychological actions. Notice that in both scenarios above, the situation leads the characters to a need. In the first scene the character with the sick mother needs to find the money to pay for medical care for his mother; his friend needs to protect the image of his politician father. In the second scene, the character who has side-swiped a car needs to protect himself from his violent father; his

companion, as president of the student council, needs to set a good example by recommending taking responsibility for the accident. So, as is often the case, the needs of each character are often in opposition. This creates the potential for drama. In fact conflict is often referred to as the “engine of drama.”

So here’s the point. When characters say things to each other in a play, they have purpose, even if the characters are unaware of that purpose. The reason they have purpose is because the playwright has written these words for a reason and with design, and even when the dialogue and the actions implied or stated seem spontaneous or random, they are not. This is only a trick performed by the skilled playwright as she weaves her storyline using *her* craft. Unlike the sloppiness of real life, everything in a play is there for a reason, and it is your job as an actor to find those reasons and to enact them in such a way that all the storytelling dots are connected.

The problem, though, is this. Just because I have told you about what playwrights do, and even though you may accept it as true, that doesn’t mean that you will be able to accomplish your purpose—to tell a clear and compelling story. Why? Because map reading takes practice; learning to sculpt takes time. So does telling the story the playwright provides with dialogue and stage directions. Your teacher can’t make this happen—only you can, through practice and determination and repetition. Unfortunately, in spite of how important this work is to the actor, very little time is actually spent on script analysis in acting class. We spend far more time learning to execute actions well than on deciding what those actions should be.

When we were talking earlier about emotion-based acting, I think I made myself clear as to why I teach basic acting focused on doing rather than feeling. But even action-based

acting does not always address directly the issues of storytelling that the actor must address. My first book was called *The Actor as Storyteller* for a very important reason. Telling the story of the play or script is the primary function of the actor. I hope by now that point has been made. But the story does not tell itself. The playwright tells the story in her script as best she can. But then it is up to those involved in the performance to bring it to life. Sometimes they bury it instead. People read books, go to the movies or the theatre, or watch television to see the story, but only if it is a good one, one that is compelling in some way, one that makes them want to keep watching. No matter how nicely you cry or how well you move, if you fail to tell a good story no one will want to watch. And your job is to tell that good story even when the playwright has failed to give you one.

This is where my focus of teaching has changed during the past several years. Though I called my book *The Actor as Storyteller*, for a long time I still spent the least amount of time on the analysis part of acting. I believe that many acting teachers make the same mistake. It is somehow presumed that actors know how to recognize a story and how it works. I have learned over the years that this is simply untrue. Yes, I still teach actors to play psychological and physical actions but before they can play them, they must know which actions to play, and without understanding the story they are telling, making effective choices is simply not possible. So in my next article we'll start with the beginning of the process and focus on figuring out just what the story is. We'll also explore conflict and how it relates to playing objectives—one of the most important of storytelling acting tools. ▼